

Eating local is a simplistic prescription

Environmental impact of food consumption requires real thought

MOIRA WELSH
STAFF REPORTER

Every day, Debbie Field walks a few blocks from her home to the stores on Roncesvalles Ave. and buys food for her dinner. She visits shops that sell locally grown food, where she might, for example, buy a leg of lamb from Guelph, carrots from Holland Marsh and cheddar cheese from Prince Edward County.

Not everyone lives near shops that pride themselves on selling locally grown food. Some supermarkets are slowly adding a few local choices to their shelves.

“Even if we just ate the food that was in season in Ontario, it would make such a huge difference,” said Field, executive director of advocacy group Foodshare. “There is no need to get moral about it, everything you eat doesn’t have to be locally grown.”

In some ways, the act of eating locally grown food is simple. But the concept behind it is complicated.

Food has a direct impact on climate change, the green economy and, ultimately, the growth of vibrant urban neighbourhoods.

Environmentalists have made the case that shipping food thousands of kilometres around the world creates carbon dioxide emissions that contribute to climate change. So does the clear-cutting of rain forests — those great absorbers of carbon dioxide — to raise cattle destined to become hamburger patties.

Buying meat, cheese and produce grown on local farmland decreases pollution from transportation. If it is organically produced, it also lessens the pollutants from pesticides. It increases profits for farmers in the region. And, ever so slowly, it means that more shops selling local and organic food will open in neighbourhoods across the city.

As interest in locally grown food



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Debbie Field cooks using locally-grown food and, within reason, tries to buy foods in season.

increases, consumers, environmentalists and public health officials are pushing for sweeping changes to the way Torontonians choose what they eat.

Toronto sits below a third of Canada’s best farmland, and the city’s public health department recently released a consultation report looking for ideas on the way Toronto can transform its approach to food, and promote better health by consuming local food sold in neighbourhood shops and bolster the region’s green economy, from farmer through to shopkeeper.

Dr. David McKeown, Toronto’s medical officer of health, says the time has come to look at the big issues behind the act of eating.

“We have to look at how food is produced, processed, transported, retailed, marketed, consumed and

disposed of. The whole spectrum, from grow it, to throw it,” McKeown said in an interview. “Locally grown food,” he added, “is one part of that bigger picture.”

Toronto shoppers spend \$7 billion a year on food, according to the report, called Food Connections: Toward a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto.

Increasingly, shoppers are spending their grocery dollars on local, organic or fair trade food.

These new markets, the report says, are driven by demand, not governments or corporations, “signaling a dramatic increase in the role of eaters and citizens in shaping the emerging food system.

Not all agree with the approach. University of Toronto associate professor of geography Pierre Desrochers released a study for the

Montreal Economic Institute that found local food is a poor indicator of a product’s impact on the environment and is not a valid way to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

The study found producing food more efficiently and using less pesticide is better for the environment.

Foodshare’s Field says the relationship between food and the environment requires thought.

“There are environmental issues related to transportation,” she said, “but there are lots of environmental issues related to production.

“So it’s possible that a small organic cooperative in the south might have less of an impact on the environment than a 1,000-acre (400-hectare) mega-farm in Ontario.

“A small organic farm is not using big tractors and lots of pesticides and chemicals. Pesticides and her-

FOOD CHOICES

- Whenever you can, buy local food.
- Change your diet to avoid out-of-season foods that are shipped thousands of kilometres.
- Shop at your local farmers’ market. There are dozens across the city.
- Take your kids to a farm to see how food is grown, so they don’t think it magically arrives at the grocery store.
- Look for butchers who use locally grown and organic meat.
- Buy treats from your local bakery, not frozen desserts shipped from afar in refrigerated trucks.
- Learn how to can food or properly store it, so you can buy locally grown food in season and eat it later.
- Give your kids a taste-test using a juicy, local strawberry in season and one that travelled in a truck from California to encourage them to prefer local foods.
- Ask the manager at your grocery store to bring in more locally grown produce, meat and cheese.
- Sources: Foodland Ontario, Greenbeltfresh.ca and Foodshare

bicides are chemicals that are carbon-based, so if you are a conventional farmer in Ontario, you are using a lot more carbon than you are as a small, organic farmer in the south,” she said. One of the simplest approaches, advocates say, is to buy local produce in season. If you can, eat a tomato grown in the greenbelt north of the city, not a tomato flown in from Morocco. Or buy the meat of locally raised lambs, not cuts shipped in from New Zealand.

Kirkpatrick, of the Toronto Environmental Alliance, said consumers need to use common sense strolling the grocery store aisles.

“We are not telling people to stop eating bananas,” he said.

Field agrees. “I don’t think it makes sense to be 100 per cent local; there are hard choices to be made. “Food is complicated.”